

Tech. Sgt. Angela Shepherd

Flying can be a pain in the ear

Simple tips can make flying healthier

By Staff Sgt. Matthew Bates

Today's expeditionary Airmen find themselves flying to points all over the world, from here to there and to everywhere in between.

As if suffering through long delays, crowded terminals and long flights isn't bad enough, actually boarding the plane is typically where the trouble begins. Tiny seats, sweaty people and a horde of germs make the recipe for a less-than-perfect flight.

But, all hope is not lost. There are several simple things you can do to stay healthy and increase your comfort while flying, say medical experts.

Germ warfare

We've all been there. You just settle into your seat and the person next to you starts sneezing and hacking and spewing germs everywhere. The good news is that the airplane's air filtration system will catch many of these germs. The bad news, it won't catch them all.

The best defense against these germs is a good offense.

"Wash your hands regularly," says Lt. Col. (Dr.) Donald Kowalewski, chief of staff for the 59th Medical Operations Group at Wilford Hall Medical Center, Texas.

This can be as easy as using a small, 2- to 3-ounce bottle of antibacterial hand soap or cleaner that meets the rules for carry-on luggage. Plus, airplane restrooms have soap and water.

Colonel Kowalewski also points out that most of the flu-like symptoms people experience while flying are not due to pesky germs. They are actually the result of dry air, lack of fluids and lower-than-normal oxygen tensions.

"Staying hydrated is perhaps the number one best thing you can do for air travel," he says. "Recall the rule: 'Urine yellow, drink more, fellow!'"

After a long flight, Airmen return home to Hurlburt Field, Fla., from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Crammed into big "rotator" flights home, globetrotting Airmen must endure germs or "airplane ear." Some might even suffer deep vein thrombosis from sitting so long during a flight.

Airplane ear

Other than your mom's meatloaf, there are probably few things worse than blocked ears caused by pressure changes. It's uncomfortable, you can't hear worth a darn and you look silly walking around with your finger in your ear. Your ears clog up when the pressure fluctuates inside the cabin as the plane takes off or lands. If you have a head cold or congestion, you are even more susceptible. And that can be dangerous, too.

The colonel calls it "airplane ear" that he said, "Comes from unequal air pressure between the outside and inside of your ear drum."

To remedy the problem, encourage your eustachian tube to equalize the pressure in your ears during descent.

"Do this in whatever way works best for you," Colonel Kowalewski says. "Moving your head forward and back, swallowing, yawning or chewing gum has been successful."

But, before you put that stick of gum in your mouth, listen to this. Sucking is actually preferable to chewing to relieve ear blockage. So, trade that Wrigley's for a Lifesaver and in no time at all you'll be able to hear that screaming kid in the next row.

Pesky leg lumps

While long flights might bore you to death, blood clots can do just that — kill you. These guys form in the deep veins of the legs and can lead to a potentially deadly embolism, sometimes long after you've gotten off the airplane. So, if your legs start to experience swelling, warmth or redness, it's not because the person next to you is cute. It's because you're in the beginning stages of deep vein thrombosis. Not a good thing.

"Sitting unmoving anywhere for several hours is terrible for the circulation," the colonel says. "This — combined with little sleep, those salty peanuts or crackers and cramped conditions that prevent movement — will cause swollen ankles and even muscle cramps."

To keep these clots and cramps from forming, get up and walk. Whether hiking to the bathroom or visiting that nice couple in row 12, getting out of your seat a few times during the flight.

"If the captain or pilot has turned off the 'fasten seat belts' sign, don't be shy — get out of that seat and take a brief stroll," Colonel Kowalewski says.

It may save your life.

